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ABSTRACT

Student unrest has always been a concomitant of student life, going as far back as 1200 and 1229 when students were killed in Paris during town-gown battles. Much of the student unrest in early America was simply a matter of youthful high spirits, though there were some serious cases often involving mass rebellion. The greatest single cause for student rebellion was probably the food situation which caused students at both Harvard and Yale to stage a mass protest. Student grievances were also expressed over the rigid curriculum and harsh disciplinary measures. Unrest in the early days was generally confined to the Ivy League and Southern institutions, and in addition to the rigidity of the discipline, was caused by the influence of social and political flux in the emerging nation, the clash of Southern and Northern life styles (there were many Southern students in Northern institutions), and the failure of the institutions to keep pace with rapid social change. The root causes of contemporary student protest do not differ sharply from those of the earlier period. Eighty-two percent of the disorders in 1964-65 and 66 percent of the disorders in 1967-68 were directed specifically at institutional problems; this was true for Columbia and the Harvard strike. Both in the earlier and present period, rebellions began when use of legitimate channels of expression of dissatisfaction brought no result. (AF)

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WHEN STUDENTS REBEL: THE AMERICAN COLLEGIATE EXPERIENCE

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Only a few years ago, students going off to college entered four years of limbo where they were largely ignored by all save the educators responsible for their nurture. Not so today. The past six years have seen growing waves of student unrest which have made college students a primary concern of all Americans. Attempts to explain this unrest are many. Among the major hypotheses are the following:

1. permissive modes of child-raising have produced a generation which reacts to frustration in infantile ways;
2. deterministic behavior theories have created a class of persons who reject the notion of personal responsibility;
3. affluence unaccompanied by a tradition of service makes work meaningless and a search for diversion inevitable;
4. breakdown of paternal authority and the resultant confusion of sexual roles has placed too much pressure on the young;
5. the educational climate fostered by competition with Communism often forces student protest or withdrawal;

6. draft deferments engender guilt which can only be assuaged by attacking the system;
7. the decreasing value of the individual in our society engenders protest;
8. the hugeness and complexity of our system of life foredooms movements for change within the system;
9. the Civil Rights movement has evoked similar student movements;
10. advancing technology makes past values obsolete, future life-styles unpredictable, forcing the young to immediate and constant change as a way of life;
11. media contribute to the self-awareness of the young, undermine the institutions of the past, and expose the weaknesses of casual beliefs in their pitiless glare;
12. Youth reared in an atmosphere of scientific rationalism cannot cope with evil and guilt without lashing out at self-created devils.¹

All such explanations are inherently weak in that they examine student unrest only in the context of contemporary America, or, at best, in the context of the con-

temporary world. Only the barest of lip service has been paid to past actuality.

In point of fact, unrest has always been a concomitant of student life. Full-scale town and gown battles in which students were killed occurred at Paris in 1200 and 1229 and at Oxford in 1355.² In 1422, Vittorino da Feltre found it necessary to resign his chair at Padua because of the unruliness of students.³ Nearer our own time, students played a significant role in the Revolutions of 1848 in Europe,⁴ and the more recent National Socialist convulsion in Germany.⁵ Closer to home, American higher education was racked with disturbances in the 1760-1860 period.⁶

While it has been averred that contemporary disorders differ markedly in nature from those of previous eras, it seems worthwhile comparatively to examine at least the two eras of American student unrest so as to illuminate current theories of student unrest by exposing those elements which transcend contemporary instances.

Pranks and Boisterousness

A great deal of the student unrest in early America, as is the case today, was simply a matter of

youthful high spirits. The history of American colleges offers no dearth of examples.

Harvard's President Wadsworth noted in his diary for 1727 that "Sir Saltonstall, who had been appointed the first Respondent for the approaching Commencement, having been a Ringleader in revelling, and making great rackets and hollowings and tumultuous, confus'd noises in the College yard, was put by from being Respondent."⁸

In 1817, two students at Brown University were arraigned in civil court fo burning an outhouse,⁹ and two years later, Brown's president, Asa Messer, wrote to a parent: "Your son, since his return, has thrown a stone through the wāndow of one of the Tutors, and has put into his bed a shovel of ashes; though the Tutor had given him no Provocation; nor did he even know him."¹⁰

The University of Georgia, among other disturbances, had to contend in 1830 with students "pulling down fences, tearing up corn, blocking up avenues, drawing away a wagon and sulky and throwing them into the river and breaking off the railings of the bridge."¹¹

The University of Alabama had to deal with such diverse instances of youthful boisterousness as vandalism of a Bible and ransacking of a tutor's room in 1840, a chivaree at a nearby ladies' seminary in 1842, and unauthorized riding of horses and the throwing of a stone at a professor in 1847.¹²

Some of the disturbances were clearly cases of springtime abulia, as when University of Georgia students declared their own holidays for the inauguration of President Franklin Pierce on March 4, 1853, for April Fool's Day in 1859, and for no apparent reason on April 30, 1855.¹³

Serious Indiscipline

We have come to expect incident of this sort wherever young people are gathered together. What is surprising is their frequency in American colleges and universities prior to the Civil War. Dartmouth faculty met sixty-eight times on disciplinary problems in the academic year 1832-33, and the University of North Carolina faculty had to handle 282 disciplinary cases in 1851, and this with a student body of only 230!¹⁴

This remarkable level of unruliness can be partly explained by the picayune nature of collegiate rules in the period, but this explanation is not all-encompassing. In the case of the University of Alabama, "the chief popular reputation the school gained during the pre-war days was that of a trouble spot where unruly and destructive boys, brandishing dirks and pistols, rode roughshod over their mentors, outraged the townfolk, and made University life a continuous, disgraceful brawl."¹⁵ Indeed, there were in many places instances of stabbings and shootings, some of them fatal,¹⁶ and frequent instances of mass rebellion. It is with the latter that we are principally concerned in this paper.

Food Riots

Perhaps the single greatest cause of student rebellions in this era was food. College rules generally stipulated that the students eat in Commons, and when the food was especially unappetizing, the students could be counted on to make their displeasure known. Again, the horseplay involved when many young men sit down to table together sometimes escalated into something quite different.

A singularly dramatic protest to poor food was evidenced at Yale in April of 1764 when all but nine of the boarders were seized by violent digestive disorders diagnosed by President Clap as caused by the introduction of a physic into the breakfast dough by persons unknown.¹⁷

The prevalence and nature of food riots in our early colleges is best apparent from the many disturbances in the Commons of Harvard University.

The Great Butter Rebellion of 1766 was fought over some tubs of imported Irish butter that had gone bad. Having made their complaints known to one of the tutors to no avail, students gathered in Holden Chapel to pass resolutions of defiance, and left Commons en masse before prayers the following morning to breakfast in Cambridge. Although a Committee of the Faculty condemned six firkins of the butter and solemnly pronounced four more fit only for use in sauses, the Corporation and Overseers apparently felt threatened by the student action and demanded a humble confession from them. The confessions were not forthcoming until the students were confronted in Chapel by Sir Francis

Bernard, Royal Governor of the Massachusetts Bay Colony and chairman of the Overseers.¹⁸

Only two years afterward, continuing dissatisfaction with Commons caused the entire senior class to attempt to transfer to Yale. Frustrated by Harvard's refusal to provide letters of recommendation, they planted a Rebellion Tree that would figure in later protests.¹⁹

Following another butter disturbance in 1805, there occurred in 1807 the Rotten Cabbage Rebellion. After a student petition to the Corporation about the food situation brought no real amelioration, the students boycotted Commons. The faculty's immediate and somewhat puzzling reaction was to close Commons! Each student was directed to submit a written apology within the week. So few such apologies had been received by the week's end that the faculty were reduced to bargaining with parents to intercede with their offspring. The tactic was successful, and the rebellion ended. Both parties attempted to propagandize their positions, the students in a frolicsome pamphlet, "Don

Quixots at College, or a History of the Gallant Adventures lately achieved by the Combined Students of Harvard University; Interspersed with some Facetious Reasonings," and the faculty with a more sober effort entitled, "Narrative of the Proceedings of the Corporation of Harvard College, relative to the late Disorders in that Seminary."²⁰ It was in this disorder that one university official reportedly told students that their behavior was "indecent and unmanly, evincing a disposition to break through all restraints of law and authority, a contempt of all salutary regulations, which if not checked would inevitably make Harvard the nurse of demagogues and disorganizers."²¹

A mock epic, "The Rebelliad," commemorates events which began with the hurling of a piece of bread in Harvard Commons one Sunday night in 1818, and continued with the hurling of crockery. Four sophomores having been rusticated, the remainder of the class gathered at the Rebellion Tree and, when President Kirkland forbade such conduct, left the college en masse. So many were dismissed that only thirty-five eventually graduated with their class,

others, such as Ralph Waldo Emerson, were rusticated, and the rebellion was quashed.²²

When Harvard abolished its Commons in 1849, a significant source of student unrest was eliminated at that university.

Curriculum and Discipline Rebellions

There were many other causes for disturbance than those provided by collegiate dining halls. Most frequent of these, as we have already seen to some extent in the Harvard Commons disturbances, was solidarity with fellows who had been disciplined. One of the clearest cases of this type was the Gorham Rebellion at Amherst in 1837. When William O. Gorham ('38) was dismissed for refusing to perform in the "Junior Exhibition" on grounds of principle, his class supported him and certain of them were also expelled. At length the class retracted and all, including Gorham, were welcomed back.²³ While this pattern is not evident in all of the major collegiate disorders of the period, it was certainly common, as will be obvious from the instances which follow.

One of the earliest collegiate riots occurred at Yale on July 30, 1764, when a mob of students and townspeople attacked President Clap's house "by throwing great stones against it with violence which broke about 30 squares of glass damnified the window sashes and clapboards broke off and carried away the gates, and other enormities did committwhereby the president was slightly wounded."²⁴ Only two years later, a spring teeming with student unrest culminated in a grievance petition signed by most upperclassmen being presented to the Corporation, which, after hearing out the students, advanced the date for the spring recess. Continued unrest, however, forced them to send the underclassmen away before the end of the academic year. In the wake of these disturbances, President Clap resigned on July fifth.²⁵

Princeton suffered a series of rebellions in 1807, 1814, and 1817. Of the last, President Ashbel Green noted in his diary: "January 19, 1817. A very serious riot commenced, with the manifest intention of preventing the usual religious exercises of that sacred day A great deal of glass was broken; an attempt was made to burn the out buildings, and the

bell was rung incessantly."²⁶

Brown University's President Messer found it necessary to write to a clergyman in 1819: "Some time since a large number of our Students combined together for the Purpose of subverting a regular recitation; and from them we selected twelve supposed to be prominent, and fined them each four dollars. Your Son is one of the twelve."²⁷ In the same year, the chapel and dining hall were vandalized and the yard gates and the shutters of the college-house stolen.²⁸

A much more serious and organized protest occurred in 1824 when several students who had petitioned the Corporation were suspended, whereupon the library and chapel were ransacked, recitations disrupted for weeks, and windows broken in the president's house.²⁹

The University of Georgia was the target of an especially well-organized riot in 1832 when fourteen students marched through college buildings at night, breaking doors and windows, making a great racket, and carrying away the chapel steps.³⁰

A rebellion with quite a contemporary flavor erupted at Harvard in 1834. The exact nature of the incident which triggered it is unclear. Some say it was a dispute between a freshman and his Greek tutor, others that it was a freshman-sophomore rebellion against a Latin professor. At any rate, some students having been disciplined, their fellows petitioned the faculty. When the petition was rejected, they rioted. By May twenty-ninth, President Quincy found it necessary to send the sophomores home. He then announced that he would ask the Grand Jury of Middlesex County to investigate the property damage. A "black flag of rebellion" appeared on Holworthy Hall; furniture and windows were broken; the juniors took to wearing armbands; a handbill attacking the president appeared; Quincy's effigy was hanged from the Rebellion Tree; there was an explosion in the chapel; the seniors issued a signed circular giving their version of events. No students were punished as a result of Grand Jury action, and so the disturbance gradually died down.³¹

Among the last collegiate rebellions of the period were two which occurred at the University of

Alabama. The first, in 1845, began when some students were suspended for harassing ladies walking through the campus. Other students then rioted and were suspended. Eventually, most signed a recantation and were reinstated.³² The second was occasioned in 1854 by the expulsion of a sophomore, James M. Doby, for warning his fellows of a faculty inspection. Thirty-three of his classmates signed a letter to the faculty threatening to boycott college exercises until his reinstatement, and were in turn suspended. Other students withdrew in protest, and newspapers throughout Alabama condemned the faculty.³³

Causes

While the individual causes of the disturbances described varied a good deal, three general groupings of causes can be adduced: the pettiness and rigidity of discipline in our early colleges, the influence of social and political flux in the emerging nation, and the clash of Southern and Northern life styles. These are to some extent mutually interpenetrating.

Many authors who treat of rebellion and dis-

turbances in histories of individual institutions or in more general histories do so as part of a larger treatment of collegiate discipline.³⁴ Far from being a mere convenience in outlining, this reflects a real causal connection. College rule books were lengthy and detailed, offering few outlets for youthful high spirits. They seem to have derived from the Yale codification of 1745,³⁵ thus reflecting the stern Puritan ethic of New England.

Throughout the period under consideration, that ethic was dying, doomed by the new political egalitarianism and the rapid social change of a growing country. It is significant that most of the student rebellions occurred after 1800, and a great number after 1828 when the Jackson Era brought particularly marked social and political change. Yet the evidence of political change's influence goes back to the disturbances at Yale in Revolutionary times, of which one author has commented: "Student unrest was undoubtedly augmented by the bold example of the Sons of Liberty in political affairs."³⁶

The times were changing, and the movement away from Puritan theocracy to democracy and from belief in

man's depravity to belief in man's perfectibility, if it made possible Jacksonian Democracy, reform movements, and artistic renaissance, also made student unrest inevitable. For collegiate governance lagged behind the times, causing one perhaps well-intentioned professor to view the crisis in a strikingly contemporary way:

Indulged, petted, and uncontrolled at home, allowed to trample upon all laws, human and divine, at the preparatory school, . . . the American student comes to college, but too often with an undisciplined mind, and an uncultivated heart, yet with exalted ideas of personal dignity, and a scowling contempt for lawful authority and wholesome restraint. How is he to be controlled? 37

To strike a further contemporary note, it is well to bear in mind that the Industrial Revolution was a major factor in accelerating social change in the early nation, so that one could well assign some blame for unrest to the advance of technology!

Finally, it is striking that "the most serious rebellions were those which either occurred in Southern colleges or took place in Northern institutions with large contingents of Southern students."³⁸ Southern students were quicker to regard the codification of Puritan New England as tyranny.

One can, then, characterize student unrest in our early colleges as a reaction against the environmental press of institutions whose governance had failed to keep pace with the extremely rapid social changes of the day. Significantly, violence was by no means confined to the campuses, but was a generalized social phenomenon in the period.

The Contemporary Scene

We also live in an era of rapid social change and attendant violence, and the root causes and dynamics of our student unrest (not to mention its forms and procedures) do not seem markedly to differ from those of unrest in the earlier period.

Contemporary American student protest may fairly be said to have begun with the Free Speech Movement at Berkeley in 1964. Since then, literally hundreds of disturbances have rocked American campuses each year. There are many more than there ever were; they are more interrelated than they ever were; more of them are specifically directed to extra-campus issues. Yet the similarities with the past are many and striking.

While it is tempting to view our current campus

disorders primarily in terms of off-campus issues, it is necessary to note that one researcher has found that 82% of the disorders in 1964-65 and 66% of the disorders in 1967-68 were directed at specifically institutional problems, and a percentage of the "off-campus" issues could fairly be described in terms of university policy towards these issues rather than the issues in vacuo.³⁹ Another prominent researcher has noted:

The largest number of all types are reported from schools with rigid, highly controlled environments The implications seem clear enough. Institutions that stress opportunities for personal growth have far fewer problems than those that do not. But the most severe sources of tension ordinarily arise in those place that are administratively over-organized and severely restrictive of student play — that attempt, in other words, to maintain an excessive degree of control over student impulse life. 40

Cases in Point

The experience of Columbia University is somewhat illuminating in these regards, especially since Columbia, as an Ivy League institution, has traditionally been regarded as a mecca for the brightest and most mature students and because there is a tendency to identify the Columbia uprising with the external political objectives of leftist students. In point of fact, however, student living conditions and the absence of

student esprit de corps at Columbia have been criticized.⁴¹ Moreover, it was at Columbia that the Vice-Dean of Graduate Faculties was reported by the school newspaper to have said: "Whether students vote 'yes' or 'no' on an issue is like telling me they like strawberries."⁴² The atmosphere was not as rosy for students as it might have appeared. Perhaps the most important issue of the strike was the university's building a gym in Harlem, symbolic to students of its "exploitation" of the community,⁴³ while previous disturbances had centered on the presence of NROTC on campus, CIA, Marine, and Dow Chemical Co. recruiting, and the university's involvement with the Institute for Defense Analysis.⁴⁴ It seems evident, therefore, that the Columbia uprising was first and foremost a rebellion against the press of the institution, a major portion of the press being the institution's perceived reactionary attitude toward social change. "Columbia — on the shores of one of the nation's largest black ghettos and adrift in a society sick with war, manipulating the lives of its young people for misguided crusades — was tottering along with the old order it had served so well."⁴⁵

The same motifs were evident in the Harvard Strike

of April 1969. Student life at Harvard was not all it was thought to be. "For most," some student critics afterward averred, "Harvard education remains hopelessly vast, impersonal, and dull."⁴⁶ The catalytic issue was the continued presence of ROTC on campus, even as an extracurricular activity, while previous disturbances had centered on visits by the Secretary of Defense Robert F. McNamara, and a recruiter for the Dow Chemical Company.⁴⁷ Significantly, mass student support of the strike was not based on agreement with the SDS position on ROTC, but on the use of police to clear University Hall.⁴⁸ As so often in our history, the apparent cause of disturbance was less important than the institution's reaction to it.

This experience illuminates the radical tactic of attacking the university. In this way, committed radicals can acquire broad support.⁴⁹ The few are in tune (or so perceive themselves) with the massive social changes underway; the many react to these changes only as mediated by the press of institutions with which they are directly involved. Not only concerned moderates, but even the alienated can be mobilized in this way. "Far from being an idealistic reaction against society's treatment of the

downtrodden," noted one weary observer, "the purposes of the revolution/seems to be, in the words of a leaflet of the enragés of Harvard, 'to root out the boredom of our daily lives.'"50

There is no need to multiply examples. Case histories aplenty have already appeared,⁵¹ and the press supplies more with each passing week. While individual circumstances and incidents differ, the patterns described are repeated with monotonous and ominous regularity.

Lessons

It is impossible not to be impressed by the similarities in issues, circumstances, and modes between our contemporary student unrest and student unrest in the 1760-1860 period.

In the earlier period, America was struggling toward social and political self-definition. The experiment with democracy was only beginning. It would take the searing experience of the Civil War to clarify the situation sufficiently to make stability possible. In our own day, we have embarked on a rethinking of our social and political forms, characterized by the cry for

participatory democracy.⁵² Thus sweeping social change directed at changing the nature and powers of the "Establishment" has been a characteristic of both periods. Advancing technology has played a major role in both instances. The earlier period coincided almost exactly with the Industrial Revolution; with the onslaught of cybernation, our era has become the "Second Industrial Revolution." The latter part of the earlier period saw a significant women's rights movement and an increasingly acrimonious dispute over slavery; civil rights and women's rights agitate our own day. If students responded to societal strife in the earlier era by lashing out at unresponsive institutions, is it surprising that they do so today?

Less significant but no less striking are similarities in behavior patterns of protesters and university officials. Both periods have seen rebellions begin when use of legitimate channels of expression of dissatisfaction brought no results. Both periods have seen meetings and even confrontations between protesters and governing boards, mass meetings, petitions, pamphlets, boycotts, and minor damage.

Differences, of course, abound. With the remarkable recent advances in communications technology, it is not surprising that contemporary disturbances are more interrelated as well as more intense and prolonged. The increasing sophistication of the population in general makes it inevitable that disturbances be increasingly directed at the problems of social change rather than solely at the symptoms of those problems in individual institutions. Yet the lesson remains: the historical situation is not entirely unique, and those explanations of contemporary student unrest which presume a unique social situation are less than perfectly useful.

Historians are often the worst prognosticators, and it is idle to look to history to chart the future course of student unrest. If the social situations are historically similar, they are also historically unique, and it is the uniqueness that will determine the future course of student unrest. One of the unique elements, for example, is the presence in our day of media for instantaneous mass communication, which can intensify and accelerate social change and its concomitant violence so significantly as to make the present situation uniquely dangerous.

Yet a careful reading of history can be of benefit in the present crisis. Collegiate officials will do well to ponder the central role of disciplinary codes too strict for the times and the breakdown of legitimate channels of expression of grievances in our early student disturbances. An administrator who is considering bringing police on campus will do well to meditate not only on the recent experiences of Columbia and Harvard, but also on the experience of President Quincy of Harvard in 1834. And all educators will do well to set their considerations on the subject of university governance in the broad context of general social change, for our history makes it clear that social institutions which fail to keep pace with social change inevitably generate discontent and violence.

NOTES

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¹⁵Sellers, 197.

¹⁶Coulter, 74; Rudolph, 97; Sellers, 230-232.

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¹⁸Morison, 118; Samuel F. Batchelder, Bits of Harvard History (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1924), 135-137.

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²¹Kahn, 124.

²²Batchelder, 144f.; Morison, 209f.

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²⁵Ibid., 23f.

²⁶Brubacher and Rudy, 53f.

²⁷Bronson, 184.

²⁸Ibid., 185.

²⁹Ibid., 188f.

- ³⁰Coulter, 70.
- ³¹Morison, 252f.
- ³²Sellers, 203.
- ³³Ibid., 221f.
- ³⁴Brubacher and Rudy, 53-56; Coulter, 59-89; Rudolph, 105-108; Sellers, 197-257.
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